

“The Inability of the Law to Sanctify”
Romans 6-8
“Citizens of Another Country”
Part IV

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Title: “The Inability of the Law to Sanctify”
Text: Romans 7:13-25
Theme: Our victory over sin is only possible when we rest in His victory over sin.
Finding Him enough is realizing our union with Him.

The eternal view:

Many of God’s people live and die in fear over their failure and own innate inability to measure up against God’s Word. Their failure only compounds their feelings of guilt and regret. The tragedy is not in their failure to perform, but in their failure to rest in God’s work, not theirs.

Why am I teaching this?

For too long God’s people have used rules and regulations as a measure of and means to sanctification (i.e. the outworking of our identity). In so doing they live in unnecessary bondage by living the Christian life according to the rules of sin and not of grace. My intent is to see God’s people live in the power of the cross.

Our paragraph is the beginning of another question that was provoked by the previous thought.

Question 4

“Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? **May it never be!** Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful” (Rom. 7:13).

Structurally, the section runs from 7:13-8:30. This passage, however, has three movements in it. Because of its size, we will look at all three movements separately. Many commentators look at verse 13 with the pervious paragraph. This, however, would be inconsistent with the grammatical pattern running from 6:1 and following.

Because the Law is holy, righteous, and good (7:7-12), I am now confronted by an enormous dilemma (7:13-25). Verse 12 ends with a statement that opens the way for verses 13-25. Why does the law appear to work death in me?

“[Paul’s] duty here is to rid his readers’ minds of the error that sanctification comes through the law.” (J.P. McBeth, Exegetical and Practical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, 1937, 182 [McBeth incorrectly uses the term “unsanctified believer” to describe the individual in this paragraph. There is no such thing as an “unsanctified believer.”])

An initial problem:

There is significant debate among good men concerning this passage (7:13-25). Is the person referred to in our text the apostle Paul before regeneration or is it a believer? It is important enough to warrant a conclusion although dogmatism will be (almost) impossible. If this is the apostle Paul before regeneration, then the topic does not flow with the discussion. If this is the believer, then it is describing the ongoing battle that saved people have with sin.

As a believer, I have within me the existence of an old nature that wars against my soul. Although its demise is rendered certain at the cross and its authority has been broken, it still exists as a part of me that is in rebellion against God. It is this part that makes me a law-breaker and refuses to let me rest in the finished work of Christ. But it is the cross of Christ that gives me victory over my law-breaking old nature and sets me firmly and securely in the law-keeping triumph of Jesus Christ.

There is no sense in which I should become comfortable with my sinful expressions. I hate sin because God hates sin and the Holy Spirit is the one who causes me to hate sin.

Alva McClain in his commentary on this passage makes the following observation.

If we are not satisfied to get our holiness and sanctification just as we got our justification, trusting in Jesus, knowing that we died with Christ, reckoning it to be so, yielding ourselves to Him – if we are not satisfied with that, then this chapter is for us.

There has been a terrific controversy raging in Christendom over this chapter and over this question: was the apostle Paul converted or unconverted when he wrote the experiences recorded in the seventh chapter of Romans, when he said, “I am carnal”? Was he converted or not? I am inclined to believe he was converted, and that we have here a picture of a saved man trying to be holy by keeping the law.

There is one view of this chapter that is terribly mistaken, and that view is the one that says what we find in here is the Christian’s normal experience. That is the devil’s own method.

If you ever must say that (and, of course, a great many of us do sometimes); if you are meeting defeat in your life (for that is what it is in this chapter), then at least be concerned enough about your defeat and your lack of victory to cry with Paul, “O, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” No one ought to repeat that as a litany without the cry of despair that the apostle Paul uttered when he said it. He certainly did not say it unconcernedly.

No Christian need ever enter into the experience that is recorded here in the seventh chapter of Romans, if he only receives with the heart what the sixth chapter has to teach him. But if we cannot know what God has done for us in Christ; if we fail to reckon it to be true; if we fail to yield ourselves to God – then there is nothing left for us but the dreary, depressing, desperate experience which we find in the seventh chapter. And it is for such that God has caused it to be recorded. (Romans – The Gospel of God’s Grace, 149-150)

If sin uses the Law as a means of launching attacks against me, then for me to look to the Law for my protection from sin and for sanctification is misappropriated energy.

I. The problem of defeat (vv. 13-20).

- The problem of law-breaking does not lie in the Law, but in me (v. 13).

It is because of the Law, being a reflection of Christ that I see just how abhorrent I truly am. The law shows me for what I am. The word “utterly” is our English word “hyperbole.” It means to deliberately exaggerate or overstate. Although my wickedness cannot be overstated, the law enables me to see just how wicked I truly am.

Remember, sin uses the law as a platform for launching its attack against me (vv. 8, 11). My fallen nature embraces sin and through the law shows me for what I am.

“The law was given in order that sin might be seen for what it is. Without the law we would not recognize sin in its deepest evil; we would not see it as rebellion against the command of God.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 289)

- Although I am no longer in sin, there was a time when I was “sold in bondage to sin (v. 14).” “The passive means that Paul is carried off by sin, not that he sold himself to sin.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 291) There was a time when I was carnal and not spiritual. This, however, is no longer true. As believers we are never under the authority of sin. The cross has forever broken the power of sin over me. For the unbelieving, they are always under the dominion of sin.

“Beginning with verse 14, Paul shifts from the past tense so common in the previous section to the present tense. The most natural way of understanding this is to see it as pointing to Paul’s present experience.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 290)

Believers can act like the unsaved or carnal, but they can never become unsaved or carnal. **To act and become are significantly different ideas.** What you are in your identity is what you have become. Although you still have an old nature that is carnal, and although this carnality can show itself for what it is in you, this is not your identity. Thus for us to say a believer is carnal in identity is tantamount to saying a believer is an unbeliever or the saved are lost.

ILLUSTRATION:

You might act like a pig, but you will never become a pig. It is impossible. Because of who you are as a human, you can never become a pig. You might act piggish, but you will never become a pig.

For us to say a believer is fleshly is calling him dark light, or unbelieving belief, or a lost saved person. When I look to the Law for my sanctification all I do is aggravate my law-breaking bent. This delights sin.

- Although I am no longer in Adam and thus “under sin’s authority,” I still sin. What I once was, I no longer am, but still have (vv. 15, 16).

Sanctification is never by strength of will. All our promises are empty. If we set our wills on law keeping, we shall simply play in a game that we cannot win. Because of our sinful, old, fallen nature, sin uses the law and destroys us. Sin uses that which is good in an abused manner to bring us under its dominion.

How do we reconcile the “practice” of sin in verse 15 with Galatians 5:21 and 1 John 3:4-10? Structurally the “practice” of Galatians 5 and 1 John 3 are present participles. The “practice” of Romans 7:15 is a present indicative. The participle communicates continuation or “practice” whereas the indicative speaks of something that is present and is “now” in opposition to something that is past or future. The indicative only means that you have sin. The participle says you are “sinning.”

- When I do sin, I understand that it is not who I am that is sinning, but the old nature that is sinning (v. 17).

“This is not the honored guest, nor the paying tenant, but the ‘squatter’, not legitimately there, but very difficult to eject.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 293)

There is a part of me that bends its ear to sin’s call. There is a part of me that delights in the temporal pleasures of fleshly appetites. There is a part of me that finds sin appealing. This part of me that responds to sin’s invitation is my fallen, unregenerate flesh.

Moule correctly notes how this statement is

“Not for excuse, but to clear his thought, and direct his hope, he says this to himself, and to us, in his dark hour.” (H.C.G. Moule, The Epistle to the Romans, 199)

“This sin that lives in him, though it is not the real Paul, is what produces the acts which the real Paul hates so much.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 293)

- The old nature (v. 18) is unredeemable. It is forever evil. There is nothing in it that is good. What I was in my fallen nature will not leave me until I reach the Bema seat judgment of Christ.
- **My will cannot completely keep the old nature in check.** Because this is true, I still sin (v. 19). As long as I continue to look to the law for my sanctification, I will continue to live a frustrated life of law-breaking (v. 19).

- Yet I must keep in mind that when I do sin, it is not who I am in Christ that sins, but who I was in Adam (v. 20).

The thought of verse 17 is repeated.

The sinning part is not my identity. I am fully responsible for my sin and I am accountable for my sin and I face the consequences of my sin on a horizontal level. But all that I do as an expression of my old nature is not who I am.

“Paul’s will is not behind it. He is not saying that he is not responsible; after all, it is his action. He is saying that he is no careless or audacious sinner. His will is firmly in opposition to evil.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 294)

This brings us to our second primary point inside of this paragraph.

II. The principle of victory (vv. 21-25)

- First, recognize that there are two principles within you, one evil and the other good (vv. 21-23).

If I make law conformity **a measurement of holiness and a mean to holiness**, I will find myself a law-breaker (v. 21). Although I do delight in the revelation provided by the law of God’s character, if I look to the law as a measurement and means of holiness, then I place myself under the authority of sin (v. 22).

My fleshly lusts, the old nature is warring against my soul. **Here Paul clearly describes the conflict that every believer is faced with.** There is a real tension between the old self that has been crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6) and the new self that is growing in its knowledge of how satisfying Christ is in His person and His work.

What Paul seeks to wake us up to is the real war that is being waged within all people of God. Our fleshly lusts, the old nature is warring against our soul. Paul’s word choice is telling. He calls this law a different law. The word means one that is different from the previous law mentioned. It is not the law of God, but the law of sin and death. It is a rival law.

The word “waging war” is used only here in the New Testament. It means, “To carry on a campaign against.” The language of warfare is used through the New Testament, but this particular word is used only here. It is, however, a compound word and its root word (without the prefix) is used seven times in the New Testament. There is a winner and a loser in this campaign. At the outset it is very important that we understand the victory of Christ over sin and death (Col. 2:13-15; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). **The fight against sin has already been won.** It is for this reason Paul describes us as having been freed from sin and dead to it (Rom. 6:7, 11). However, **Paul is speaking of the “already-not yet” principle of living the reality of the cross within the context of a two nature person.** Paul calls us to be what we already are judicially, but have not yet experienced in time.

In my union with Christ I am no longer under the authority of sin (Rom. 5:21). I have been freed from sin. Yet the members of my body (i.e. the flesh) cry out for gratification in opposition to the mind. This is real warfare. Paul says this **rival law** is seeking to “make me a prisoner of the law of sin and death.”

“The thought of conflict is important. Paul is still fighting. He has not surrendered to the powers of evil.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 295)

“Observe the present tense, which indicates not necessarily the full success of the strategy, but its aim.” (H.C.G. Moule, The Epistle to the Romans, 201)

Within the larger context of Romans 7:21 and 22, Paul sets forth the essential truth that **conformity to any law will never bring about one’s sanctification**. The law, any law, can never bring me deliverance from my fleshly fallen nature. This is why Colossians 2 reads as follows.

²⁰ “If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ ²² (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) --in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, **but are of no value against fleshly indulgence**” (Col. 2:20-23).

You cannot fight lust with law. Grace is the only victory producing means over sin.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.

³ “For though we walk in the flesh, **we do not war according to the flesh**, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵ **We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God**, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, ⁶ and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete” (2 Cor. 10:3-6).

There is real warfare taking place and it is happening on the soil of one’s soul. Paul’s charge to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1 resonates with the same principle.

¹⁸ “This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them **you fight the good fight**, ¹⁹ keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. ²⁰ Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:18-20).

There is a battle being fought and it is for soul survival. He uses the same metaphor of warfare to drive home the nature of the Christian life in 2 Timothy 2:4. Peter is equally strong when he wrote the following words in 1 Peter 2:11.

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to **abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul**” (1 Pet. 2:11).

Although the battle is temporal (since it will end in heaven) it is persistent in time. **Sin working in me is dead earnest against me.** No one can turn a deaf ear to it. Every child of God is faced with this determined foe. **To meet it with rules and regulations is to play according to its system.** The issue is not whether the battle exists. Its presence is indisputable and non-negotiable. The issue is with what will you fight? If you lean on the arm of flesh, you will fail. But if you meet sin with grace, you have won.

ILLUSTRATION:

There was a time when I could run long distances. With joy I would “race” in various city sponsored events. The distance was usually an 8K or 5 mile event. I would attempt to run as fast as I could. Throughout the race there was a tendency to give way to my fatigue and to allow my lungs and legs to control my mind. My body would beg for relief and try to convince my mind that it wanted to quit. But my mind knew what was true and would push past the temporal inconvenience imposed on the lungs and legs. And without exception the race would end and relief would be brought to the complaining lungs and legs. Throughout the race I knew what was true that in spite of the physical protest I would not die and all of the discomfort would end.

The same is true in our race for the Lord (Heb. 12:1, 2). Our flesh protests the inconvenience of not being gratified by concession. But our minds tell us that victory is ours and that the race will end and we will receive the prize. We simply must push past the temporal appeal made by an irritated flesh. The completion of the race is guaranteed. God will finish what He has begun (1 Thess. 5:23, 24; Phil. 1:6). Let us face our flesh fully aware of the finished work. Let us treat our flesh as having no real authority over us. **There is no entitlement to the flesh.** Its only outcome is death and its only future is total destruction. You and I can win the war against the flesh because it has already been won for us. Now, **we are simply to rest in His finished work as we fight toward a completed goal.**

- Second, you must come to the end of self-reliance and begin to rest in His all-sufficiency (v. 24, 25).

The Law, although not sin, is not the means whereby sanctification is worked in me. Our triumph over sin’s abuse of Law is only found in Christ and in Christ alone. No matter how many obstacles I place in my path to fight my sinful tendencies, nothing created can deliver me from myself.

All believers must come to the end of themselves. Until this happens, they will continue to look to rules and regulations for a measurement of and mean to their sanctification. In so doing, they will live under the authority of sin.

The word “wretched” occurs only twice in the New Testament (Rom. 7:24; Rev. 3:17). It is “A heart-rending cry from the depths of despair.” (Sanday and Headlam).

Deliverance from this wretched condition is only possible through Jesus Christ our Lord. When He is found to be enough in this life and in the life to come, then we will rest in the experience of our position.

Victory can only be tasted when we say from the depth of our destruction, “I can’t; only Jesus can.” You can never find what you seek in anything created. It is only our Creator God that can satisfy the innermost longings and lustings of your soul.

“Clearly Paul’s words express gratitude for a present deliverance, but it is likely that they also have eschatological significance. The deliverance we have today is wonderful, but it is partial and incomplete. It is but a first installment of greater things to come, and Paul looks forward to that great day with his burst of thanksgiving.” (Leon Morris, PNTC, The Epistle to the Romans, 1988, 297)

- Third, although you will hate the sin you commit, see your failure and your victory as a part of His purpose.

“So then, to sum the whole phenomenon of the conflict up.” (H.C.G. Moule, The Epistle to the Romans, 201)

We must understand that our identity is in Christ, even though our flesh is still listening attentively to sin’s call.

What will happen in the next section (8:1-17) is an explanation of what it means to have been “set free from the body of this death” (7:24).

APPLICATION (What is the NEXT STEP?)

1. It is time to give up your fight against sin by using law. Laws are good when used properly, but if you look to them as a means to and a measurement of sanctification, you will always fail.
2. It is time to find all you desire in the soul satisfying goodness of God.
3. Today, it is your call to repent from self-reliance and it is an invitation from God to come to Him for your rest from sin.
4. Why will you not come? What is so appealing that would keep you from coming to Him for everything you need?